

Early Development of CM/ECF

TEO experimented with Electronic Case Files as early as 1988. Various commercial vendors have also explored electronic filing services for attorneys with mixed results. Some commercial ECF vendors have been used in federal courts.

An ECF demonstration project started in the spring of 1995 in response to severe problems that the Northern District Court of Ohio was having with a large number of maritime asbestos cases. The AO implemented an operational ECF service in three months. This project served as the forerunner to a fully functional CM/ECF prototype.

In summer of 1996, the Southern District of New York Bankruptcy Court began working with the AO to implement an electronic filing service for large Chapter 11 cases. This service became operational in late 1996 and demonstrated that the prototype ECF could support large workloads and be tailored to the local needs of the courts. In the spring of 1997, seven additional courts began participation in an expanded CM/ECF prototype project.

The National CM/ECF Initiative

The Committee on Automation and Technology of the U.S. Judicial Conference strongly supported the organization of the "ECF Initiative." Its goal is to expedite the development of electronic case file systems and new case management systems and deploy these systems throughout the federal judiciary. After extensive development of functional requirements by a large group of court and AO personnel, a comprehensive cost and benefit analysis was completed. This analysis included detailed technical, risk, and cost comparisons among several commercial and judiciary-developed CM/ECF candidate systems. The AO's CM/ECF service was selected as highest rated in all major evaluation categories. This system will replace the current case management systems with a next-generation case management and electronic case files application.

The CM/ECF Technical Solution

The success of CM/ECF is largely due to the chosen technical solution, which is characterized by the following practices.

Use of commercial products and standard languages

- Commercially available products (Informix and StrongHold) are used to manage the database and the Web servers, respectively.
- Standard programming languages (Perl, HTML, and JavaScript) are used for the application system.

Ease of maintenance through high-level tools

The CM/ECF design team created some programming tools that combine the developers' programs together in such a way that many standard programming tasks are eliminated. These include complicated processes associated with the latest technology, such as maintaining accurate page context information as the Internet user navigates between pages, collecting data from those pages and saving it for special database interface procedures, checking the user's access rights to those pages, and issuing special database commands when appropriate. Because of these support tools, changes can be made faster and a programmer's learning process is simplified.

The provision for user customization

Three basic activities occur when a person selects a docket category from a CM/ECF menu:

- User identifies the specific event type to be docketed, such as "answer to cross-claim."
- CM/ECF prompts for preliminary information, such as the case number and parties.
- CM/ECF runs the processes for that event type.

For each event type, the court's CM/ECF administrator can specify (using a simple Excel spreadsheet) which processes to run, the sequence in which to run them, and certain behaviors of the processes, such as how the user will be prompted and what data will be collected. The administrator can also set up overall CM/ECF parameters that are unique to the particular court site, such as court name and date formats.

CM/ECF provides special tables that enable these tailoring activities.